

INTERVIEW WITH GENERAL MAXWELL TAYLOR

[ANNOUNCER]: On June 28th, 1983, General Maxwell Taylor, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, was interviewed by Professor Richard Neustadt at his home in Washington.

NEUSTADT: General Taylor, in the first week of the Cuban Missile Crisis, what was your perception of the problem, and the alternatives — the options to deal with it?

TAYLOR: Well, fortunately, there was no question about the problem. The President announced his objective within the hour after seeing the photographs of the missiles: it was to get the missiles out of Cuba. That solved so many things, because if you're drawing up a policy, it should consist of an objective and ways to get there. I find in Washington, more argument is expended on the first, they never get to the second.

Once we got such information as was available — and of course, the information is never complete, or entirely satisfactory — I would say we grouped ourselves around three possible alternatives. I call them (facetiously) to "talk the missiles out," to "squeeze the missiles out," or to "shoot the missiles out." The first was to use negotiation: get in touch with Khrushchev and tell him, "We know you're there; now you have to get out, let's talk about it." The second one turned out to be the quarantine solution: using a naval

blockade, or something resembling one, again, to show the seriousness of our intent to Khrushchev, but avoid doing anything that might escalate rapidly to points in the sky, one knew not what. The third was to shoot them out, which was a surprise attack on the missiles in Cuba at the outset, without any notification to Khrushchev. And the question, I suppose, will be, why was I for shooting them out?

NEUSTADT: Sure.

TAYLOR: For the following reason. As an artilleryman, when I saw those missiles, with their transporter vehicles along side of them, my immediate thought was they can pull them out and hide 'em any time they want to. And that was certainly the case. So if that's the case, and we announce to Khrushchev "we gotcha down there," certainly at a minimum he'll hide those missiles in the jungles of Cuba, and we can never get 'em out unless we invade the island. Well, invading the island was the last thing I thought we should do, in our interest.

NEUSTADT: Tell me why.

TAYLOR: We were having trouble in Europe; Berlin was being threatened by Khrushchev; in the Far East we had the Laotian problem; the Vietnam problem was just burgeoning; and our forces were (relatively speaking) low, in numbers and readiness. And once you invade Cuba, what are you going to do with it? You gonna sit on it for eternity?

You could have the seed of guerrilla warfare against our occupying forces, and again tie down a large part of our conventional strength. Of course you shouldn't want that. So there's a possibility if you hit the missiles before they got hidden, at least you'd have that many accounted for, in a positive sense. But furthermore, you will have really shaken Khrushchev; he will know we're moving right in. He doesn't want us to invade, either; and I felt there was a fair chance of him giving way on that point. So that was the reason why the Joint Chiefs, from the outset, recommended the "shoot 'em out" [approach].

It was argued very eloquently by Bobby Kennedy that that would be our doing the act of the Japanese in attacking Pearl Harbor. I never felt my conscience [one bit; it was] completely clear, because the President on the 9th of September, I believe it was, warned the Soviets that "if there are indeed offensive missiles in Cuba and you say there are not, I will take whatever measures necessary." So he was warned, and he should have taken the consequences.

Now, having said that, we found the quarantine, as you know — the world knows now — the President, after listening to all the pros and cons of these three points, the first one dropped out very quickly. It really [came down to choosing between] the "squeeze 'em out" or "shoot 'em out" [options]. Not until the 21st, so far as I know, had he finally made up his mind. And then it was not to eliminate the "shoot 'em out", but to use the lesser method first, and then meanwhile, the military were told to get ready for an attack on the missiles, and also ready for an invasion of Cuba.

NEUSTADT: Now, did you remain, as long as the issue was open, in favour of the "shoot 'em out" [option]?

TAYLOR: I never wavered until my Commander-in-Chief took another decision. And I add, I'm glad he did, because it proved to be enough.

NEUSTADT: General, you were loyal to the decision, but I take it you didn't think that the quarantine was going to work.

TAYLOR: I thought it had dangerous possibilities, because Khrushchev could simply bring his ships just short of the quarantine line and stand there and scream to the world over the violation of international law we were indulging in, and meanwhile start that argument going while his missiles completed their readiness in the island. That was certainly a possibility.

NEUSTADT: If one then had to turn to the air strike, which Mr. Kennedy apparently reserved as an option, what's the disadvantage of doing it later?

TAYLOR: Well, Khrushchev could have done two things with the missiles: continue to build 'em up, or hide 'em, which was always the option which I thought most likely.

NEUSTADT: That's what worried you most?

TAYLOR: Yeah.

NEUSTADT: All right; had you worried, in the first week, about the possibility that the air strike wouldn't suffice? Some other reason why it would have to be too big, would lead to invasion, or something of the sort?

TAYLOR: Yes. We analyzed very carefully the military requirements of an air strike, and like most military requirements, the longer we studied, the more we needed. I believe that the total number of aircraft which the Air Force wanted to use was around 500. Well, that was a good way to kill the project! But then it was an honest estimate, because not only would you have to get the missiles on the ground, but meanwhile Cuba was prickly with SAM missiles — surface-to-air — many of which we knew were operational. So you had to protect your aircraft attacking the ground missiles [by eliminating] the anti-air threat.

So yes, that was thought about, and the President, very wisely, had General Sweeney, a three-star general who would be responsible for the outcome, and he came up and he gave a very frank statement. Yes, he would undertake it without any question, but [he said] "you can't expect me to get 'em all; some of the missiles would get away." And these other requirements of collateral use of aircraft — yes, that was a requirement. So really, Sweeney, at the last minute, by a

straightforward statement — which the Joint Chiefs did not disagree with one minute — certainly tilted the President, if he needed any real tilting, to the quarantine option as the initial option, to be followed, if necessary, by the second.

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NEUSTADT: Was it unexpected to you? Was [the final] outcome [of the crisis] unexpected to you?

TAYLOR: I was so sure we had 'em over a barrel, I never worried much about the final outcome, but what things might happen in between.

NEUSTADT: The outcome to which I'm referring is Khrushchev's acceptance of our ...

TAYLOR: Well at some time he had to accept. I never expected it on that particular day.

NEUSTADT: Okay, you thought it was going to go a while longer ...

TAYLOR: ... Unless he was crazy and full of vodka. But I assumed his colleagues in Moscow would take care of him.

NEUSTADT: You have written in your retrospect in the Washington Post on October 5, '82, as I remember — the 20th year — that you don't

recall any concern about the strategic balance, or any fear of nuclear exchange in this whole period. Now, some of the civilians do recall worries about the time of that second Saturday; worries that really run to two or three steps up the ladder of escalation. The Soviets don't accept our demand; there follows an air strike; the Soviets then feel impelled to strike the missiles in Turkey; the Turks call on NATO for support; we feel we have to do something in Europe; the Soviets then launch a nuclear exchange — something like that was in some of their minds. I take it not in yours?

TAYLOR: They never expressed it to a military ear, I'll say that.

NEUSTADT: That's interesting.

TAYLOR: Not at all. It's the nature of some people [that] if they can't have a legitimate worry, they create them. Apparently they had some of that in the group you're speaking of.

NEUSTADT: In your mind, there was no legitimacy in this worry?

TAYLOR: Not the slightest.

NEUSTADT: ... Because Khrushchev could look up that ladder ...

TAYLOR: If he was rational. If he was irrational, I still expected his colleagues to look after him.

NEUSTADT: And at the top of the ladder, if I understand what you saw correctly, the imbalance between the damage we could do to the Soviets and they could do to us in a nuclear exchange was so ...

TAYLOR: Oh, of course.

NEUSTADT: ... so enormous ...

TAYLOR: Of course.

NEUSTADT: ... that that would restrain them.

TAYLOR: Yeah; but why on why didn't Khrushchev see this at the outset? Because he was bound to lose with conventional forces right on our doorstep. He couldn't win! Except [the] only explanation that I can find that has a certain appeal is that the meeting of Khrushchev with President Kennedy in Vienna had so impressed him with the unreadiness of this young man to head a great country like the United States, plus the experience that he had seen in the Bay of Pigs, [led him to believe that] he could shove this man around any place he wants. Well, he was wrong.

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NEUSTADT: Incidentally, when President Kennedy finally decided on

the second Saturday to disarm the missiles in Turkey — those old missiles in Turkey — I take it, having disarmed them, he was going to announce it to try to demonstrate that we weren't there, that there was nothing there worth the Russians bombing. Did that trouble you at all?

TAYLOR: Yes, it would have been a great mistake to do it right in the middle of this thing. I was not aware of the fact [that] the President had discussed with State the desirability of getting the missiles out of Turkey until this time. And I opposed it, obviously. When you've got the guy on the run, why say, "Come back, we'll give you a piece of cake!" Why do that? No sense in it whatever. It would again show these uncertain Americans, they're not sure of themselves. It's quite true, the missiles were outmoded, and I was very happy to get 'em out after very careful negotiations with Turkey and [replace] them by the presence of a nuclear submarine.

NEUSTADT: But you were not persuaded by whatever concerns the President had to do this precipitous act in the middle?

TAYLOR: I didn't know he was going to do anything. I thought we'd talked him out of it.